

The Buick gave up the ghost a mile back, but Joey didn't stop praying 'til he crashed through the church door like Satan at a tent revival. Maxine—mid-stand—went down like felled timber, crushing Sister. Cuthingham a sister of prominent mass. Joey army-crawled to the altar bench, forehead pressed to the wood. "Lord, save me."

The Gospel According to Joey Camel

Joey knew he was fucked the second He hit Mrs. Langley's mailbox. He groped around the floor of his '66 Buick Special, fingers slicing open on Jack Freeman's shattered Mason jars. The last drops of salvation had long since vanished—just like his common sense.

The search ended when the butt of Mrs. Langley's 20-gauge cracked his ribs like a Sunday sermon. "Called the Sheriff," she informed him, like she was ordering pie.

Orvin Ricketts was pissed. Any other night, he'd be happy for an excuse to "fuck around" with Joey Campbell (locally pronounced Camel), but not when Duke of Earl was about to wrassle Wo Li the Dog on channel 9.

What the hell. As he lit um up.

If Joey had two brain cells to spark, he might've thanked the old bat for jumpstarting his evening. Instead, he ground the Buick's starter into its already-running motor like a man trying to dig his own grave with a spoon. RPMs screamed. The column shift hit D. The Buick lurched south toward Judy—Mount Judaea for the pious.

"Get that sumbitch 'fore he kills somebody!"

Orvin only slowed 'cause Mrs. Langley was planted in the northbound lane, waving her ruined mailbox like the angel of death. I will if you'll get the hell outta the. Not that it mattered. Joey lived in a camper at Bass—nowhere to run But hell. Fran crackled over the radio: "hey jack be Careful, Justin hit a deer last week. What's your twenty"

Meanwhile, at Piercetown Holiness Church...
Jack goes to church.

According to the IRS, Jack Freeman cuts logs. But logs are a side hustle. Saturday nights, he parks by the outdoor privy behind the church, Mason jars in tow. Folks swing by, say hello. If you know, you know.

The church—a 30x40 cendarblock box with a corrugated roof—was the place to be On a Saturday night. Kids stomped beetles under the yellow porch light. Maxine Peters hollered from inside, "Y'all scram!" but nobody moved.

Little Pete had a beetle up his nose and was howling like a banished sinner.

Beth Camel sat on Clint Camel's tailgate, Glad Clint wasn't on the list. the list her mama made of boys to avoid. (Mostly Campbells, a few Meltons.) Clint puffed a stolen Pall Mall, feeling dangerous.

Back to Joey's Divine Intervention

The Buick gave up the ghost, but Joey didn't stop praying 'til he crashed through the church yard like Satan at a tent revival. Joey went straight through the screen door. Maxine—mid-stand—went down like felled timber, crushing sister Cuthingham. Joey army-crawled to the altar bench, forehead pressed to the wood. "Lord, save me."

Orvin hadn't expected Joey to flee to church. The Buick sat dead at the door, high beams spotlighting the chaos. Inside, Bringing in the Sheaves played like a funeral dirge.

Orvin watched a minute—long enough to pocket the Buick's keys and have a short chinwag with Jack (if you know, you know). Then he strolled back to his cruiser, rehearsing the great story he'd tell Fran.

Some nights, salvation smells like shine and bad decisions.